

The Victim and the Pilot

A HIROSHIMA REUNION

BY GREG MITCHELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT DEL TREDICI



The victim:
Akihiro Takahashi

I have no intention of telling you about my grudges, now that so many years have passed," Akihiro Takahashi told Paul Tibbets when they met one afternoon outside a beautiful park in Washington, D.C. "And I'm sure you were just following orders."

When the two men shook hands, Tibbets noticed that Takahashi's right wrist was bent, the fingers slightly twisted, his right arm scarred. Tibbets asked whether this was the result of the atomic bomb he had dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Takahashi nodded.

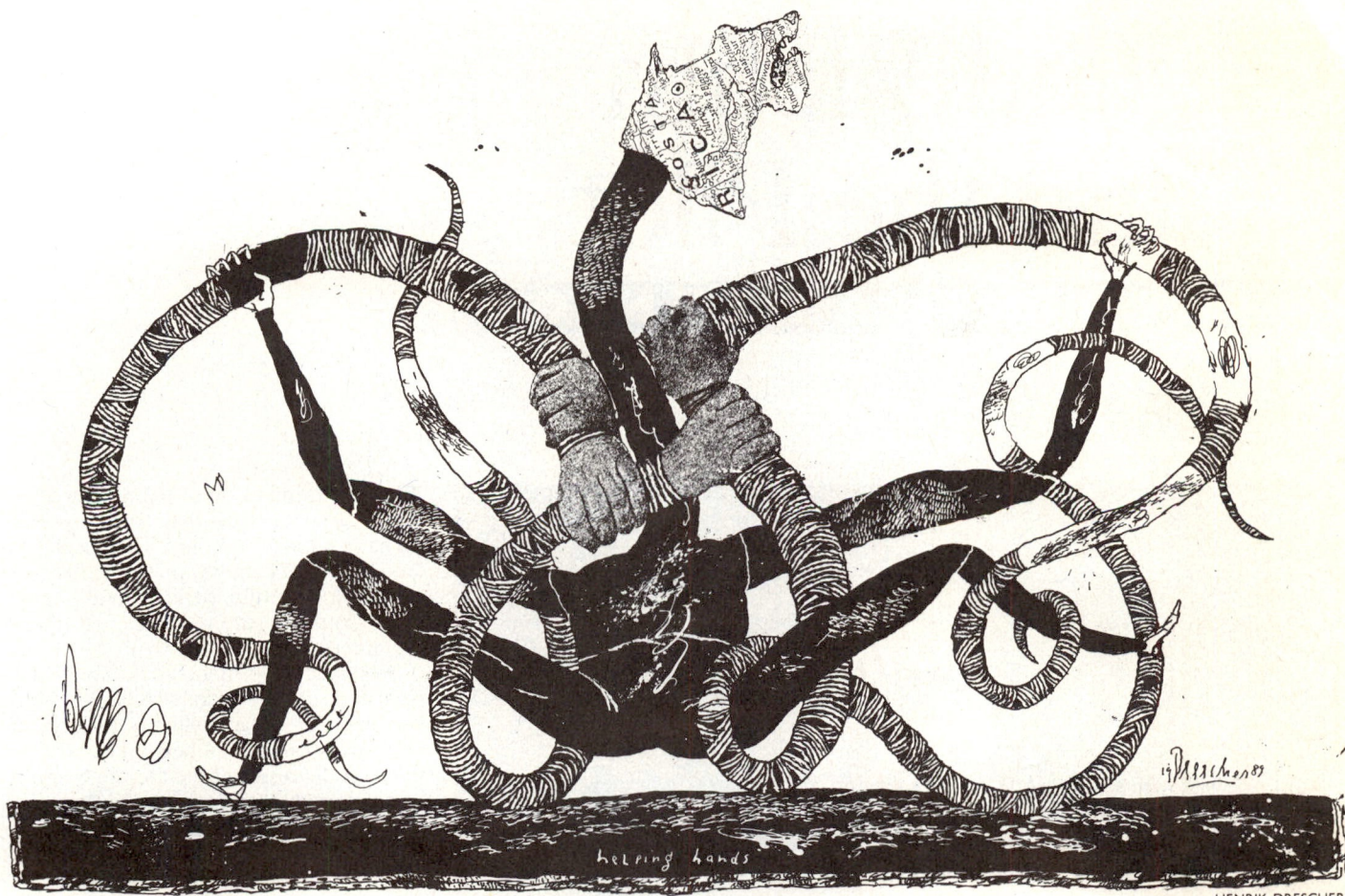
It was the first time Tibbets, the pilot of the *Enola Gay*, had met a Japanese victim of the bombing.

On August 6 this year, in Hiroshima, Takahashi will take part in some of the many peace ceremonies that commemorate the atomic attack. Tibbets, who now runs a jet-leasing company in Columbus, Ohio, says that for him August 6 is "just another day." Often, when August 6 rolls around, Tibbets has to be reminded what day it is, he says. Yet the two men continue to correspond with each other, across a gulf of pain and a bridge of hope.

Survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima frequently refer to August 6 as the day they "met the bomb." In this sense, then, Takahashi and Tibbets had met long before their odd encounter in Washington, D.C.

At 8:15 A.M. on August 6, 1945, Akihiro Takahashi was standing at roll call with sixty other junior-high-school students in a school yard about a mile from Ground Zero in Hiroshima. A single airplane appeared in the cloudless sky over the city. One of his classmates cried out, "Look, it's a B-29!" Everyone stared and pointed excitedly at the plane.

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most have extended a typically warm Costa Rican welcome to their new guests. Hand-painted signs, written in English, welcome the soldiers to their communities. U.S. military personnel—some in full camouflage gear, others looking more like surfers with TASK FORCE COSTA RICA caps and shirts clashing with their pastel shorts and Guatemalan bracelets—have become a regular sight in Puerto Jimenez, Osa's largest community and only bona-fide town.

Even the occasional gringo faux pas, such as landing a helicopter on Puerto Jimenez's soccer field and blowing the roof off an adjacent building, barely causes a ripple. The soldiers are now reconstructing the building better than it ever was.

Residents have taken a liking to U.S. Army food, termed MREs (for meals ready to eat) in military jargon. The locals find the *comida norteamericana*, which is distributed free to all who ask, to be *que rica*, very tasty. Chowing down on gourmet fare of such strange food items as barbecued beef, franks and "bean component," and beef stew, served up from brown and khaki vacuum pouches, the locals adjust to what they think is North American life.

MREs aren't the only offerings. Announcements posted in local stores promise gifts for children who come with their families for a festive community workday.

Children wearing camouflage caps and bandannas, as well as adults wearing Rambo garb, work side by side with their gringo counterparts.

The U.S. military presence is not the only threat to Costa Rica's environment. The expansion of the cattle and lumber industries and the possibility of new citrus plantations threaten to devour thousands of wilderness acres. Open-surface mining is already devastating land and choking rivers near the boundary of Corcovado.

Making matters worse, Costa Rica seems on the brink of a new gold rush. Studies conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey, the Los Alamos National Laboratories, and the University of Costa Rica have confirmed the existence of large gold deposits on the Osa Peninsula. With easier access to the remote areas, prospectors promise to inflict serious damage to the frail ecosystem.

The closest known gold camp to the Corcovado National Park is a mere 300 meters from the southernmost ranger station. From there, the miners hike upriver to a primitive strip-mining operation using water hoses to wash a hillside into the river. With the help of a foreign investor, these squatters are in the process of acquiring a gasoline-fired pump to speed up their operation. They hope to open up the

hill in time for the rainy season, channeling the rainwater to further erode the soil and expose the better gold reserves for panning. While landless campesinos have met with little success panning tidal pools on the beach, international fortune seekers are becoming principal players in many of the more destructive undertakings.

In an effort to attract foreign capital for further development of the gold industry, Costa Rica fueled environmentalists' fears by hosting an International Gold Conference in 1987. At that time, Natural Resources Minister Alvaro Umana, who has been widely praised by international environmental organizations, promised the group that while "there exist areas where you cannot mine—like our national parks—the majority of the area is certainly open to exploration."

Osa's future looks grim. The deforested areas are becoming a wasteland. And the potential for further military development, while promising attractive perks for the fast-growing population, threatens devastating social and political consequences in addition to the seemingly irreversible pattern of ecocide.

A U.S. soldier summed the situation up: "This is a beautiful country," he said. "I'd love to come back in two years when my time is up. But things here are going to really change. I don't think you'd recognize the country." ■

Thirty thousand feet above the school yard, Paul Tibbets, the twenty-nine-year-old pilot, was making a furious right turn at 285 miles per hour, and attempting to halt a steep climb caused by the sudden release of his 10,000-pound payload. He pulled on his goggles, found he could not see through them, and tossed them to the floor. "See anything yet, Bob?" he asked his tailgunner, Bob Caron, over the intercom. "No, sir!" Caron answered.

Suddenly, a bright white light filled the plane. A shock wave rocked the aircraft, and then another as the first shock rebounded off the ground. Tibbets tasted lead on his tongue—evidence of the ionization caused by nuclear fission.

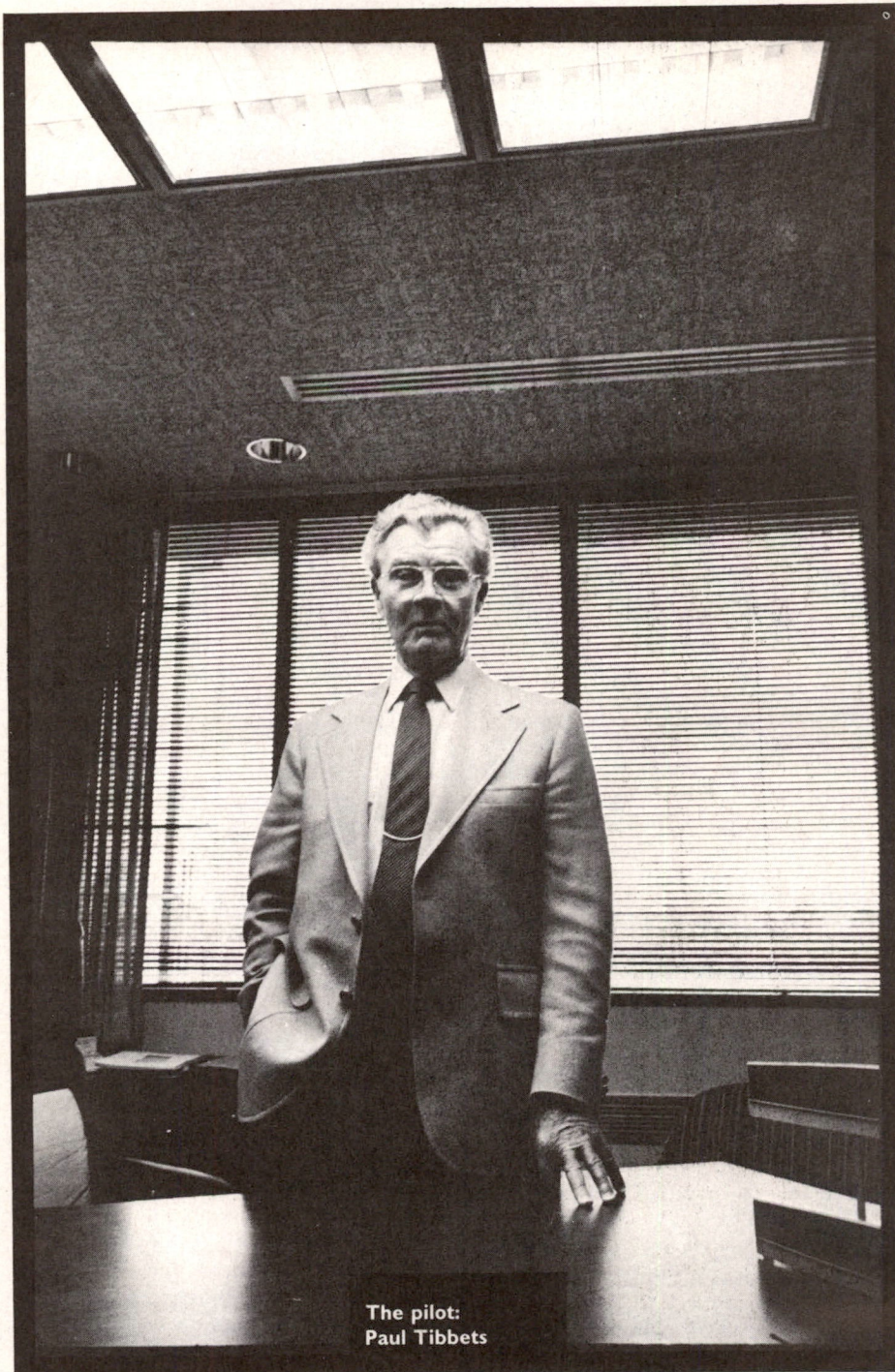
Down in the school yard, Akihiro Takahashi heard a great roar. The sky blackened and he felt himself being blown away by a ferocious gust. When he came to, five or ten minutes later, he discovered that he and his classmates had been blasted about thirty feet from where they had been standing. Their school building was flattened. A piece of glass was embedded in Takahashi's right hand. The back of his head and his legs were burned; skin hung in sheets from his right arm.

High above Hiroshima, Paul Tibbets was circling the mushroom cloud, and recording his impressions for posterity. He radioed his commanding officer on the island of Tinian, the *Enola Gay's* home base. "Target visually bombed with good results," Tibbets reported.

Takahashi made his way home and found that it had collapsed, but his family had survived. He lapsed into unconsciousness for three weeks and spent the next year-and-a-half in bed.

When he got back to the States, Paul Tibbets attended War College, where he wrote a paper on the deployment of atomic weapons. (He got a C for content and a B for format.) He joined the Strategic Air Command and was promoted to brigadier general.

After recovering from his injuries, Takahashi went to work for the city of Hiroshima. For several years he served as director of the Peace Memorial Museum,



The pilot:
Paul Tibbets

and gave guided tours to Pope John Paul II and other dignitaries. He visited the Soviet Union and spoke before a United Nations assembly in Geneva. But he soon became best known in Hiroshima for his black fingernail.

Ever since the atomic bombing, the nail on Takahashi's right index finger has turned black—as black as the sky over Hiroshima after the bomb hit, as black as the rain that fell in the following days. Every two or three years the nail falls off and he donates it to the Peace Museum, where a collection of Takahashi's black fingernails is displayed in a glass case.

Like Takahashi, Paul Tibbets couldn't

escape the shadow of the bomb. In October 1976, Tibbets stirred controversy when he recreated the attack on Hiroshima at an air show in Texas. Piloting a B-29, he dropped a mock A-bomb, which faithfully reproduced a miniature mushroom cloud, while thousands cheered. When reports and photographs of the event were published in Japan, survivors of the atomic bombing were outraged. The mayor of Hiroshima sent a telegram of protest to the U.S. Government and the sponsors of the air show, the Air Force League, asking that future recreations be canceled. The Air Force League rejected the demands, saying it had only repro-

Overpopulation is Devastating Our Environment

Most Americans think of overpopulation as something that is threatening the environment of far-off countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Yet our own country is vastly overpopulated in terms of the long range carrying capacity of our environment, which we seem to be doing our level best to destroy just as rapidly as we possibly can. The primary cause of environmental destruction in our own nation, as well as in other countries, is simple: too many people.

There is a direct link between population size and environmental deterioration. Total consumption is the product of population multiplied by per capita consumption; total pollution is the product of total consumption times pollution per unit of consumption. Those are simple, incontestable facts.

Acid rain that is devastating our forests, and destroying aquatic life in our lakes, rivers, estuaries and coastal waters, the greenhouse effect from the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, urban crowding, traffic congestion, ground water contamination and depletion, the disposal of nuclear waste, toxic waste and garbage, our vanishing farmlands and wetlands: all these grave problems, and more, warn us that — if we truly care about saving our environment — we must take action now to halt and eventually to reverse the growth of U.S. population.

Under these conditions does it make any sense at all to continue allowing legal immigration to add nearly 600,000 more people each year to our already far-too-great numbers?

Send today for our FREE BROCHURE and learn why we believe that legal immigration should be reduced to an overall ceiling of 100,000 a year, including all relatives and refugees. Such a ceiling would still be generous, yet would give priority, as it should, to the preservation of our environment, and to the interest of future generations of Americans.

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duced a historical event and had no intention of apologizing for history.

The disparate, yet profoundly linked, lives of Takahashi and Tibbets converged again in 1980, when Senator Mark Hatfield organized an exhibit of photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Russell Senate Office Building. (In 1945, Hatfield was among the first American GIs to land in Hiroshima.) Takahashi was invited to attend the opening of the show.

"Before going," he says, sitting in the small living room of his comfortable home in Kusatsu, a suburb of Hiroshima, "I really had to calm down my emotions. I did have resistance going to the country that dropped the Bomb."

Japanese television and newspaper reporters accompanied Takahashi to Washington. One of the reporters heard that Paul Tibbets was in town, and proposed arranging a first-ever meeting between the pilot of the *Enola Gay* and one of the bomb victims. Takahashi told the reporter that he was willing to meet with anyone to further the cause of peace. And so, on a sunny afternoon in June 1980, Akihiro Takahashi, accompanied by a journalist and an interpreter, met Paul Tibbets.

"He seemed to be a dignified, gentle old man," Takahashi recalls. Takahashi told Tibbets right away that he still held a grudge against President Truman, who ordered that the bomb be used, and the leaders of Japan who started the Pacific war. "It's probably impossible to erase hatred completely as long as I live," he told Tibbets, "but we must overcome hatred with our rational side. When we overcome hatred we will find true peace."

The former pilot, now president of Executive Jet Aviation, pointed out that this day was as sunny and calm as that fateful August 6 morning long ago. Takahashi replied that ever since that fine day the survivors of the atomic bombing had been appealing for a ban on nuclear weapons, and now this was more important than ever, since "the end of the world can begin with the push of one button."

Tibbets told him that if war was to break out today he would probably do the same thing he had done on August 6, 1945. "This," Tibbets said, "is the logic of war. This is why we must never wage war."

When their meeting ended, Takahashi, following Japanese custom, produced his business card. Tibbets, surprised, fumbled in his briefcase for his own card, and handed it to Takahashi, smiling, "as if relieved," Takahashi recalls. Takahashi believes he saw the glitter of a tear in one of Tibbets' eyes as they parted.

"I cherish the encounter," Takahashi says today. He is a stocky man, with dark shiny hair that pierces his forehead in a sharp V. He looks older than his fifty-eight years, perhaps because he has a severe

liver ailment that he says may have been caused by the atomic bomb. "I felt that it was good that I met him," Takahashi says. "I would like to meet him again. I consider him a friend."

At this point, Takahashi gets up from the couch and leaves the room. When he returns he has in his hand three envelopes marked with the Executive Jet Aviation letterhead. Inside are letters from Tibbets.

Takahashi has written to the former pilot several times. "Peace must be promoted by each individual's heart," Takahashi explains. On one occasion, Takahashi sent along a copy of the definitive English-language account of the effects of the bombing, Basic Books's *Hiroshima and Nagasaki*.

In a return letter, Tibbets acknowledged receiving the book but, according to Takahashi, he has never said whether he read it. "Maybe," Takahashi comments, "he is just not the sort of person who would ever say that he is sorry. I feel that today he would not drop the bomb in an air show."

Whether he would or wouldn't, Tibbets isn't saying. But he minces no words in letting it be known that he has no second thoughts about the original bombing mission.

"People get mad when I say this," Tibbets says, sitting behind his desk in his Columbus office, "but the bombing was as impersonal as can be. I felt no responsibility for the weapon. I didn't invent it or order its use. I just dropped the damned thing."

Tibbets has warm feelings for Takahashi, but he remembers their meeting somewhat differently. He says he shed no tears during or after their conversation.

"We don't exactly see eye-to-eye on things," Tibbets says. He points out that he was in favor of President Reagan's nuclear build-up and wholeheartedly supports the Star Wars concept. And Tibbets gives the impression that he replies to Takahashi's letters purely to be polite. "I'm sorry for Takahashi and the others who got burned up down there at Hiroshima," Tibbets says, "but I feel sorry for those who died at Pearl Harbor, too."

Takahashi readily acknowledges the evil of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. "But Japan only attacked military facilities, and the fleet," he observes. "America attacked residential areas. How many people died at Pearl Harbor? How many died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki?"

"But," he continues, slipping back in the couch and grinning, "if I talk more like this it will sound like I give in to my grudges, which I do not. I just want you Americans to remember Hiroshima as well as Pearl Harbor—just as we Japanese must remember Pearl Harbor as well as Hiroshima." ■